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ABSTRACT

This manual provides instructors in Peace Corps language training programs with information about two kinds of classroom testing: formative, ongoing testing and summative testing that occurs at the end of an instructional period. The first of the manual's four chapters on the purposes of language testing, discusses language testing within a competency-based curriculum, language testing generally and within the Peace Corps, and the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Chapter 2 provides a progressive sequence of formative testing activities for the classroom. The role of language learners in providing feedback about their learning and self-assessment as an assessment tool are discussed in Chapter 3. How Peace Corps language instructors can prepare language learning portfolios is addressed in the last chapter. A list of language testing texts for use in classroom testing and four self-assessment checklists that could be of use within Peace Corps language training programs are appended. (Contains 12 references.) (JP)

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Handbook

for Classroom Testing in Peace Corps Language Programs

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Handbook

for Classroom Testing in Peace Corps Language Programs

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in Peace Corps Language Training Programs

Neil J. Anderson

Peace Corps
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Manual T0068

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Chapter ONE

The Purposes of Language Testing

Introduction

Mari, a Peace Corps language instructor, was excited about having trainees try a new pair-work activity she had prepared for her class. After explaining the purpose of the exercise, she selected a student to model it with her so that the five other learners would all understand what was expected of them. But something went wrong and the group had difficulty even beginning the tasks. Two of the trainees gave up entirely and started speaking to each other in English. Mari realized that something had been misunderstood, but she was not sure what the problem was. Was the activity too difficult? Perhaps she should have conducted a quick classroom assessment to find out if her students were really ready for this kind of exercise.

Sheldon has been in Pre-Service Training for nearly ten weeks and everyone seems to be satisfied with his performance in the language classes -- everyone, that is, except him. He knows that when he tries to use the language in the community -- or even with his host family -- he has trouble understanding. In order to make his simplest wishes known he frequently has to enact embarrassing pantomimes or draw pictures. Perhaps if he had been given an opportunity to assess his own progress in the language, the Peace Corps staff would have recognized his difficulties and could have helped him.

This handbook addresses the kinds of problems experienced by Mari and Sheldon. By using the information in this book, language instructors will be able to develop simple, informal tests and assessment procedures to help them decide which activities to do next in a class. In addition, they will learn to help trainees take more responsibility for their own learning as they monitor their own progress. The handbook also explains how learners' self-evaluations can be combined with instructors' evaluations to provide a clearer picture of learners' abilities. All of these activities will contribute to more effective language teaching and learning in Peace Corps programs worldwide.

Contents of this handbook

This handbook provides instructors in Peace Corps language training programs with information about two basic kinds of classroom testing, formative and summative. The term, formative testing, is used throughout this handbook to refer to the ongoing testing that should be a regular part of language instruction. Formative testing should be viewed as a tool to help language instructors and learners know what is being learned in the class and what may not have been learned, so that instruction may be altered to meet the needs of the learners. Formative testing is often contrasted with summative testing, which occurs at the end of an instructional period, such as a chapter, a unit, or end of program.

The handbook is divided into four chapters. Chapter One provides a view of language testing within a competency-based curriculum, reviews the purposes of language testing generally and within Peace Corps, and discusses the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Chapter Two provides a progressive sequence of formative testing activities for the classroom. This sequence moves from activities which emphasize listening to ones in which the learner plays an increasingly active and creative role. Guidelines for oral proficiency rating scales to evaluate these activities are also included. Chapter Three discusses the role of the language learners in providing feedback about their learning and explains how self-assessment can serve as an assessment tool. The last chapter discusses how Peace Corps language instructors can prepare language learning portfolios to document growth and development of language skills of Peace Corps trainees. The appendices include a list of language testing texts that could be of use in further development of classroom testing techniques, as well as examples of self-assessment tools that could be further developed for use within the language training programs of Peace Corps.

A framework for viewing the role of language testing

Within an instructional program, language teachers and course designers need to determine the best balance of three elements:

1. the needs of the learners
2. the materials and activities to meet those needs
3. the testing procedures to determine if the program is meeting the needs of the learners and thus meeting its goals

A language test should support the program by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the language learners. Both the language teaching program and the testing program should be based on the instructional needs of the learners. A "curriculum triangle" developed by Carroll (1980) identifies the relationship among these variables.

A framework for viewing the role of language testing (Carroll, 1980)

The triad in the figure above indicates the interactive relationship which leads to effective use of resources within a language program. When designed and implemented in this manner, the instructional program and the testing program will work in harmony to meet the needs of the language learners. When this occurs, beneficial backwash results.

The role of backwash

In a non-technical context, "backwash" is the motion of a receding wave on the shore. In testing, backwash refers to the effect of a test on teaching and learning. Two types of backwash are frequently addressed in language testing: beneficial backwash and negative backwash. Beneficial backwash results when the objectives of the test are in agreement with the objectives of the instructional program. Negative backwash results when the objectives of testing are not in agreement with the objectives of an instructional program. The concept of backwash simply refers to the relationship between a language instructional program and a language testing program. Whether language learners are preparing for a test or studying a homework assignment, they should be engaged in the activities that the program seeks to develop.

Within the language instructional programs of the Peace Corps, beneficial backwash through language testing is an achievable goal. All classroom activities within a competency-based language curriculum should be based on the needs of the Volunteers and the situations they will encounter. These same classroom activities can be the tools which teachers use to assess whether the learners are developing the language skills necessary to carry out the competencies. Through direct testing of language skills, the language instructor can encourage the trainees to develop the skills that have been identified as essential for their work.

General types of language tests

Test results are used to make decisions about language learners, language teachers and language instructional programs. Generally, five types of language tests are given to language learners in order to make decisions: placement tests, diagnostic tests, achievement tests, proficiency tests and aptitude tests.

Placement tests are administered in order to make decisions about where a student should be placed within a language instructional program. In most cases, language learners with similar language abilities should be grouped together. The instructor can then work with individuals who are at approximately the same level of development in language skills and can help them strengthen those skills.

Diagnostic tests are prepared in order to discover the strengths and weaknesses of language learners. This information is useful to language instructors in helping the trainees make improvement in their language skills.

Achievement tests are administered in order to provide some indication of whether the instructional goals are being met. Achievement tests are based directly on the instructional content of the course. As mentioned earlier, the objectives of the instructional program and the objectives of the testing should be in harmony with each other, thus leading to beneficial backwash.

Proficiency tests provide an opportunity to test the language skills of the learners when the testing objectives are tied not to the instructional objectives, but to abilities in a language regardless of any specific instruction in it.

Aptitude tests seek to provide some indication of an individual's ability to learn a language. Aptitude tests are used as a screening device to exclude some individuals from language study or as an initial placement test, thus allowing a language program to group learners scoring high or low on the aptitude test in separate classes. But caution should be used when administering an aptitude test. Some factors, such as language learning strategies, attitude, motivation and personality factors, may not be measured in aptitude tests. Because of these shortcomings, Peace Corps does not use language aptitude tests.

Testing within the Peace Corps

There are four areas of language testing within the Peace Corps language training programs. First, placement tests may be needed prior to Pre-Service Training. The purpose of this assessment is to place learners with similar levels of language proficiency together during Pre-Service Training. This is of particular importance in the Inter-America and Africa regions, where trainees may arrive with some background in Spanish or French.

Second, diagnostic tests of language skills should be given during the course of language instruction in order to identify the language learning strengths and weaknesses of the trainees. For example, when introducing the competency, "Asking for directions," the instructor may ask students what they do or say when they are lost in the host community. If the instructor determines from student responses that they can already perform the competency, the students may be asked to perform a short skit demonstrating it. The instruction can then focus on observed problem areas or the class can proceed to competencies that have not yet been mastered.

Third, achievement tests need to be administered during the instructional program to determine if the overall instructional objectives of the program are being met. These tests also have a formative purpose in helping instructors make decisions about future lessons.

Finally, language proficiency testing may be provided at two points: at the close of Pre-Service Training and at Close of Service. In many countries, Peace Corps requires trainees to participate in an Oral Proficiency Interview, based on procedures developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (For a discussion of this test, see the Language Training Reference Manual [Whole ICE Catalog No. T0056]). A proficiency measure administered at the end of Pre-Service Training, along with additional information, may be used to decide which trainees qualify to be sworn in as Volunteers. Proficiency tests may also be administered at the Close of Service to provide Volunteers with an indication of their level of language ability at the conclusion of Peace Corps service.

Summary

The language instruction programs within Peace Corps, based on a competency-based curriculum, have specific objectives which aim to meet the language learning needs of the Volunteers. Those objectives can be translated into a language teaching curriculum and testing program which work in harmony in accomplishing the task of language instruction. Placement, diagnostic, achievement and proficiency testing can be carried out by language instructors in order to gather the information necessary to measure how well the trainees are learning a language. When these elements all come together, beneficial backwash results, instructors prepare more effective lessons and the language learning process is strengthened. Appendix A contains a list of language testing resources that may be of interest to Peace Corps language instructors. The next chapter outlines a progressive sequence of formative testing activities for the language classroom.

Chapter TWO

A Sequence of Classroom Activities for Formative Testing

The rationale

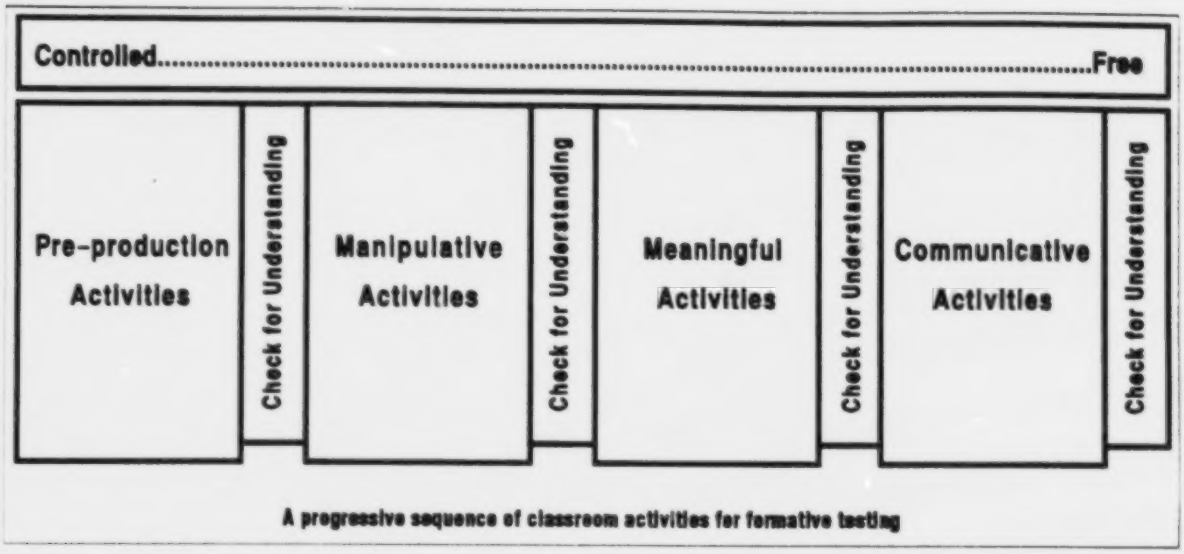
Classroom language learning activities can be classified on a continuum from "controlled" to "free" or "mechanical" to "communicative." The rationale for such a sequence is that learners need to be provided with opportunities to manipulate the elements of language in a structured environment and then move to using those same elements in a communicative environment. If learners are to be successful in using the language in a natural situation, they need to be prepared beforehand in more controlled situations.

Within a competency-based language curriculum, instructors will most likely have an objective of getting the language learners to use the language to perform certain tasks. Those tasks can typically be classified under the title of "free" or "communicative" activities. In order for those communicative activities to be successful, the instructor must prepare the learners with the language skills to perform the task. With fundamental language skills to build upon, progress towards the communicative activities can be more easily achieved.

A progressive sequence is suggested here that can be used by an instructor in preparing language learners for successful communicative activities and at the same time serve as a framework for formative testing in the classroom

The sequence

The progressive sequence consists of four segments: pre-production tasks, manipulative activities, meaningful activities and communicative activities. The diagram on the next page outlines the four segments.



A progressive sequence of classroom activities for formative testing

Pre-production activities require the language learner only to comprehend in order to perform the task. No production skills are necessary. Listening to a sentence and then pointing to a picture that best matches the description is an example of a pre-production activity. In **manipulative activities**, the language learner mechanically manipulates elements of the language to perform a task. A substitution drill which provides practice in conjugating verb forms is a manipulative task. In **meaningful activities**, the language learners carry out tasks which require them to communicate meaningful information, but there is still a clear goal of instructing the learners in the language. Paraphrase drills, which require the learner to listen to a statement and provide a rewording of the message, is an example of a meaningful activity. **Communicative activities** comprise those tasks which try to simulate as closely as possible real world language use tasks. An oral presentation or report of material that has been prepared beforehand is an example of a communicative task. This sequence progresses from very controlled activities, initiated and conducted by the instructor, to much freer activities with more room for individual use of the language by the learner.

A language instructor should not view this sequence as a fixed prescription for each class to begin with a pre-production activity and to progress through each of the segments of the sequence. Rather, it is intended as a guide to help instructors determine how best to meet the trainees' language learning needs. Ideally, an instructor will begin with a particular language learning competency in mind and determine a "communicative" activity for the language learners to demonstrate ability in that competency. The instructor then determines where in the sequence to begin in order to prepare the language learners for the communicative activity. Through a careful review of the learners' needs, their current level of language ability and the competency to be learned, the instructor can make an informed decision as to where to begin in the sequence.

As shown in the diagram above, following each segment there is a "check for understanding" to be conducted by the instructor. This "check" is the formative test; it will help the instructor decide how instruction should proceed, whether to review earlier material, continue practicing the current material or to move ahead. During these checks for understanding the instructor

should step out of the role of a language teacher and allow the learners to perform the activity without coaching or assistance. If the learners need to be coached through a meaningful activity they are probably not prepared to move on to the communicative activity. Remember that the purpose of the progressive sequence is to provide the learners with meaningful opportunities to use the language that they need in order to succeed during the communicative activity and to perform the competency outside the classroom.

During all activities the instructor should keep the competency or language task in the forefront, ensuring that the content and language for the activity are meaningful. Even a manipulative activity can be centered around meaningful content. For example, in a substitution drill the instructor can use picture cues rather than calling out the words to be substituted, so that students focus on meaningful content and not just sounds. By shaping the content of each activity in this manner, the instructor helps trainees build the language skills that they will need most for success one step at a time.

The following are examples of activities that can be carried out for each segment in the sequence. This list of suggested activities is not a complete list of possibilities, but only an introduction to the kinds of activities in each category of the sequence. Language instructors should use this as a guide for classifying the activities they may already be using in the language classroom.

Pre-production activities

Listening opportunities can be built into all classes, especially in the earlier phases of a lesson. An increased emphasis on pre-production activities does not indicate a lack of concern about getting the language learners to use the language, but rather an awareness of the importance of understanding the input and lowering stress levels for successful language learning. Possible pre-production activities include:

Total Physical Response activities: This language learning methodology outlined by Asher suggests that learners can be given oral commands, such as "stand up," "turn around," or "shake your classmate's hand." The instructor receives immediate feedback as to whether the learner understands, without requiring oral production.

Identification of pictures: Visuals are prepared with key vocabulary. The learner demonstrates understanding of the vocabulary by pointing to the appropriate picture or item in a picture. Also, a sentence may be read to the learners who must then demonstrate understanding by selecting the one picture that best represents what was said.

Scrambled pictures: A set of 4 or 5 pictures is given to the student. A short story is read. The learners then place the pictures in the correct order to demonstrate that they have understood the story.

Language games: Games like BINGO can be played to review key vocabulary.

Drawing pictures: Oral directions are given to students to draw a series of geometrical figures. Students can compare their drawings with those of other members of the class to check their understanding.

In each of the activities above, the instructor should provide less and less support to individual students. When the students are able to carry out the activities without extra prompts or hints from the instructor or classmates, it is time to move to the somewhat less controlled manipulative activities.

Manipulative activities

Activities in this category are those which still require much control by the instructor, and the language produced by the learner is very predictable. The instruc-

tor knows what the learner will say or do during the activity. These activities require oral production by the language learners. Examples of manipulative activities include the following:

Controlled conversation: Dialogues are often presented to language learners as model conversations. Trainees can be asked to memorize the conversation. The instructor then provides guidelines for what the language learner should say during the conversation. In many cases the controlled conversation will provide practice in using formulaic expressions in performing certain speech acts in the language such as greetings, leave taking expressions or apologies.

Translation: The learner is asked to translate an expression or word from the mother tongue to the target language.

Repetition drills: These drills provide the opportunity for the language learner to practice elements of pronunciation in the target language.

Substitution drills: One element of the sentence is changed, requiring the learner to substitute the new element into a sentence and make additional necessary changes. Conjugation of verb forms is a common substitution drill (e.g., I walk to school. HE. He walks to school. THEY. They walk to school.)

Again, the instructor must monitor the students' performance carefully and withdraw teacher assistance as the learners demonstrate the ability to perform the tasks independently.

Meaningful activities

In meaningful activities there is less control over the outcome of the response. The instructor may not know how the learner will respond to the question. The information exchanged during meaningful activities is similar to the kinds of information that language learners will be using on their own outside the classroom. Meaningful activities include:

Yes/No questions: Questions which require a yes or no answer (e.g., Does your host family have a telephone?)

True/False questions: Questions or statements which require a true or false answer. (e.g., Riga is the capital of Lithuania.)

Binary-choice questions: Either/or questions (e.g., Do you like formal dinners or casual ones?)

Wh- questions: Questions beginning with any of the Wh- question words: when, what, where, why, who, how (e.g., Where is the supply room?)

Following directions: Each student is given a map. Oral directions are given and students follow, indicating understanding by arriving at the final destination.

Guided role play: The instructor provides guidelines as to the roles that will be played and responses that should be given during the role play.

Paraphrase drills: Learners are asked to paraphrase a sentence given by the instructor or another learner.

Information Gap: Each learner is given information that another learner needs in order to complete the activity.

Jigsaw: Individual learners must pool pieces of information to enable the group to complete a task.

Especially when first introduced, meaningul activities may be difficult for learners to carry out. It is worth investing the time necessary for students to understand how to do these exercises, however. They can be adapted to many competencies, and provide a good means of assessing student readiness to perform similar language tasks outside the classroom. At this stage of the sequence it is also important for the teacher to step back eventually and allow learners to attempt the tasks without teacher intervention. In this way, learners can demonstrate that they are ready to move to the next stage in the sequence.

Communicative activities

Activities of this type are those which most closely simulate real-world, authentic communication tasks. The language instructor has much less control over the output of the learner during communicative activities. Examples include:

Role play: A situation is provided to the learners. No roles are assigned by the instructor nor guidelines as to what should be said., though students may brainstorm these with the instructor assisting at the beginning.

Contact assignment: Learners are given an assignment to contact individuals in the community to get information. They may prepare for the contact assignment by first carrying out a roleplay in the classroom. The information can be combined during the next class with each learner providing input based on what they learned from the contact assignment.

Interviews: Learners are asked to conduct interviews with members of the community. A survey in which all learners are asking the same questions of people of the community would be appropriate.

Oral presentations / reports: Learners can be asked to give an oral report in class based on information they have selected and researched.

Activities at this stage lend themselves to summative evaluation. That is, students may be required to demonstrate mastery of comptencies, perhaps several in one activity, through one or two of the communicative the activities described above.

Purpose of sequence

A major purpose of this sequence is to provide a framework for guiding learners through increasingly difficult language activities, one step at a time. If the instructor needs to provide substantial support to the learners in order for them to complete the activity, then they may not be ready to move on in the sequence. For example, if the learners need to be helped through a pre-production activity, that would suggest that it may be too early to move on to a manipulative activity. Or, if the learners need to be helped through a manipulative activity, perhaps they are not prepared to move on to a meaningful activity. And likewise, if learners need help in completing a meaningful activity, they may not be ready for a communicative activity, which would require more from them.

Learners do not need to know that a formative test is in progress. Instructors should select the activities that will provide the learners with a structured environment for learning and then through similar activities provide the learners with the opportunity to demonstrate that they can complete activities at that particular stage of the lesson without the assistance of the instructor.

An example of the sequence

The following example illustrates how this sequence could be applied to a teaching situation within a competency-based curriculum. The example is based on the Peace Corps Thailand curriculum, Competency 1.4, "to identify common and simple food items," and Competency 1.7, "to bargain for and purchase food items." One effective way to begin lesson planning and selecting formative testing tasks is to decide what the learners need to be able to do in the language (i.e., the competency) and how they will demonstrate that they can perform the given task. For these competencies, learners will demonstrate their ability through a contact assignment, by actually going to the market and bargaining for and purchasing food items that they need. Generally, several competencies can be covered in a single contact assignment, which is why this kind of activity is especially appropriate near the end of a teaching unit.

In order to prepare the learners for the contact assignment, in-class instruction and evaluation need to be completed. This could begin with a pre-production activity reviewing the names of common food items available in the community. The instructor uses visuals to teach the names of items typically found in the market/supermarket. Learners are not asked to say the names of the food items at this point; they simply identify an item when the instructor describes it. A formative test may be conducted to verify that learners have gained control over these essential vocabulary items by having the learners identify the picture of a food item indicated by the instructor. The instructor may also need to review/teach numbers and the monetary system of the host country as a part of these competencies.

Once the instructor is confident that the learners have mastery of the food item vocabulary and the monetary system (through pre-production activities), the lesson proceeds to a manipulative activity. The learners may be introduced to a dialogue between two people bargaining over the price of eggs in the market as a model for how bargaining is done. An instructor will need to provide some instructional time, or to have learners read an English language description beforehand, on the elements of bargaining and what the learners can expect to see. Learners may be asked to practice the dialogue and then use the key vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions from the dialogue to show that they understand the basic elements of bargaining.

Learners are then ready to move to a meaningful activity. During this segment of the lesson, learners may be asked to practice bargaining for food items in dyads, one learner acting as the salesperson in the market and the other acting as the customer. Practicing in this way allows the learners to receive feedback on the language they are using as well as their bargaining strategies. When the instructor feels that learners have had sufficient practice within the classroom, he/she will ask the learners to carry out the contact assignment. Learners will be asked to carry a tape recorder with them and to record their conversations at the market . The tape recording will be used in class for discussion purposes following the activity and then submitted to the instructor for evaluation purposes.

Some instructors may be concerned that learners may "practice" or "rehearse" with the storekeeper at the market before recording their performance. This should not be a reason for concern, but a reassuring indication that beneficial backwash is occurring. The learners are practicing in real life the assignments that are given to them in class. Since the learners are developing proficiency in the competencies that have been outlined in the language, this kind of rehearsing is something that should be encouraged, not discouraged.

Establishing a rating scale

An important element in evaluating learners' language skills is deciding what constitutes mastery for a particular activity. An 80% level has often been the criterial level for measuring successful completion of

tasks within an educational setting. For pre-production and manipulative and meaningful activities, a guideline for determining successful completion of the activity is when 80% of the class can perform the task. In a class of five learners, four would need to identify the pictures correctly during a pre-production activity. Since these tasks are not formal tests administered within a language teaching program, it is usually enough for the instructor to observe carefully who is able to complete the task and who is not.

When evaluating learner performance during a communicative task, such as the tape recording of a contact assignment, instructors should establish a set of criteria to listen for. The criteria could be based on holistic characteristics, where the instructor may simply be listening to a contact assignment tape recording to get an overall impression of how well the language learner performs during the assignment. The rating may simply indicate that a performance is "unsatisfactory," "satisfactory," or "excellent." On the other hand, criteria may be analytic, based on specific things which the instructor may be listening for, such as pronunciation of certain sounds, grammatical accuracy, fluency in communicating, or appropriate sociocultural strategies. All criteria for evaluation should be shared with the learners before they carry out the task.

In the development of either holistic scoring criteria or analytical scoring criteria, the instructor can prepare a scale for the evaluation. This rating scale lets the learners know what their performance will be judged on, and helps the instructor be more consistent in judging performance. The development and consistent use of criteria in scoring language performance provide an objective format for the evaluation.

One analytic scale rates language learners on the components of "communicative competence," the ability to communicate effectively in a language. The scale is made up of four "part" rating scales: grammatical competence, content competence, social competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence, as the term is used in this scale, includes not only grammatical accuracy, but also pronunciation and vocabulary knowledge. Content competence is comprised of what the speaker says and how it is said. This rating category would include the amount and relevance of information provided by the speaker. Social competence refers to the social or cultural appropriateness of the language used. Finally, the strategic competence component of the scale reflects how effectively the language learner is able to use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to accomplish a competency. Appendix B provides a detailed outline of this communicative competence scale, which is based on one developed by Cohen and Olshtain (Cohen, in preparation).

When applying the scale, the instructor may choose to focus on specific categories, depending on the proficiency of the learner, the focus of instruction and the nature of the task. For beginning-level students carrying out the market contact assignment described earlier, for example, the instructor may decide to drop the categories of grammatical competence and strategic competence in order to focus on the content and social elements that have been practiced. A grammar focus might be more appropriate in a more formal language task, such as meeting a supervisor, and strategic competence would be better evaluated in a simulation, since the taped exchange from the contact assignment does not allow the instructor to observe non-verbal communication strategies.

Summary

This chapter has described a progressive sequence for classroom instruction which can be used as a framework for formative testing. The sequence suggests that learners should demonstrate mastery of language performance at a given level before moving on to activities that require greater mastery of language abilities. The sequence begins with pre-production activities, then moves to manipulative activities, to meaningful

activities, and finally to communicative activities. Since the major goal of a competency-based language curriculum is for learners to do things in the language -- and to demonstrate that ability through communicative activities — language instructors need to prepare learners for a successful communicative experience by providing them with the language tools they need. By checking for understanding during classroom activities, instructors will know whether the learners have the necessary foundation to accomplish the tasks set for them. This chapter has also discussed basic guidelines that instructors can use in establishing holistic rating scales and analytical rating scales. The next chapter will look at how learners can contribute to assessing their progress in learning a language.

Chapter THREE

Feedback from the Learners

What do the language learners think?

An often overlooked resource in the evaluation of language learning is the learners themselves. The Volunteers who learn languages within Peace Corps are adults with at least a Bachelor's degree. Many have had successful work experiences or careers before joining the Peace Corps. Because of this background and training, the Volunteers are able to provide an insightful perspective on their experience in the language classes. Language instructors should ask the language learners what they think about their language learning process. Research in first and second language learning indicates that learners' own awareness of the learning process can facilitate learning, and the language learner can contribute to the overall assessment of language skills by providing a self-rating of language abilities and progress.

The role of self-assessment

Five methods are suggested for gathering self-assessment information from Peace Corps language learners. First, following any type of oral proficiency interview, have the learners provide a self-assessment of their performance. For those Peace Corps countries which use the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, an ideal time for the self-assessment is immediately after the interview. A useful self-assessment scale based on the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines is presented in Marshall's Whole World Guide to Language Learning. This scale is comprised of two parts: a narrative of the ACTFL level descriptions and a self-rating "I can do" checklist. (See Appendix C.) This checklist could be completed by each trainee following an oral proficiency interview and can provide additional information about the trainees' language learning process. These self-ratings can then become part of the trainees' language learning portfolio (See Chapter 4).

A word of caution: oral proficiency interviews typically do not measure gains in language proficiency over a short period of time, i.e., one to two weeks. If language programs include several oral proficiency interviews, self-assessment need not be conducted after each interview but perhaps only after interviews during weeks one, four, eight and twelve.

Second, the teacher should prepare a checklist of competencies to be covered during language instruction. At approximately two-week intervals during language instruction, the checklist can be given to the language learners and they can rate their own ability to complete the competencies. The checklist can consist of a three point scale:

1. I cannot perform the competency
2. I can perform the competency with difficulty
3. I can perform the competency with ease

This information can then be used with other information available to the instructor in evaluating progress and development in language learning. Appendix D provides an example of a Self-Assessment Competency Checklist based on competencies from Peace Corps Thailand. Other examples are included in the Language Training Reference Manual (Whole Ice Catalog No. T0056).

Next, after a unit of instruction has been completed, a self-assessment checklist can be provided to the trainee to elicit feedback about that particular unit. This checklist can be much more detailed in terms of the items that the language learners have to check, perhaps listing even the minor points which have been included in a unit of instruction. The language learner could use the same three-point scale described above to respond to more detailed statements about language instruction. Appendix E provides an example of an Instructional Unit Self-Assessment Checklist based on competencies from Peace Corps Nepal. Self-assessment checklists can also be administered prior to an instructional unit for diagnostic purposes. By providing such a list to the learners prior to an instructional unit, the instructor not only gathers information about what they may already know about particular topics, but also provides learners with information about the skills they will develop during that instructional unit.

A fourth means of self-assessment is for language instructors to ask the trainees each day how they feel they are progressing. This simple self-assessment could be conducted orally during regular class time. The instructor can simply ask, "What have you tried to say that worked?" or "What didn't work?" Not all learners need to be asked every time about their self-perception of progress during language instruction, but by asking on a daily basis the instructor shows interest in the language learners' self-assessment.

Finally, following special classroom activities or contact assignments, the language instructor could ask the trainees to rate their performance on a specific task (see Chapter 2 for a description of a contact assignment). For example, if the instructor gave the class a contact assignment to ask specific questions in the market, a self-assessment element can be incorporated. Trainees may evaluate their own performance, not only in obtaining answers to the questions, but also by rating their overall ability to perform the target competencies, such as bargaining, requesting amounts of a food item, or using local currency.

For each of these self-assessment activities, the same three-point rating scale can be used. In fact, it will be easier for the learner if the same self-assessment procedures are used from activity to activity. The trainees will quickly learn to monitor their own progress and provide meaningful self-assessments of their language learning experience.

Learner/teacher conferences

An additional activity which language instructors may want to implement is learner/teacher conferences. A one-on-one conference with each learner can provide valuable information about an individual's progress for both the teacher and the learner. Because most Peace Corps language classes are small, individual conferences may be easily arranged on a weekly or biweekly schedule.

During a conference the teacher and learner can review the following:

1. What learning strategies have you tried? What is working and what is not working for you?
2. How do you feel about your progress in language study?
3. Are you using the language in the community?
4. How relevant are the competencies covered in class to the realities of language use in the community?
5. What goals can you set to improve your language skills?

In addition to discussing these questions, the instructor and learner should also compare the learner's self-evaluation and the teacher's assessment of progress. Learners who tend to overestimate or underestimate their progress can benefit from this comparison as differences are discussed. With regular, consistent discussions with the learners, Peace Corps language instructors are in a better position to evaluate individual progress and growth in language development.

It is important that instructors feel comfortable in giving and receiving both negative and positive feedback in these conferences. American trainees may be very frank about the perceived shortcomings of their instructors, so it is important for instructors to maintain a professional attitude, clarifying the nature of the criticism and responding appropriately. Similarly, instructors may have to overcome their own cultural barriers and give trainees an honest look at their shortcomings as learners. If the instructor tells the trainees only what they want to hear about themselves, the purpose of the conference is lost. Usually, though, there are ways for the instructors and learners to recast a negative criticism (e.g., "That exercise was worthless," or "You did really poorly on that.") to a positive suggestion. There should be an emphasis on constructive ideas, e.g., "It may be helpful if..." or "You may want to try this way to..." These ways of giving feedback should be discussed explicitly.

Summary

Peace Corps language instructors should not forget that perhaps the most valuable resource in evaluating the language skills of the trainees are the trainees themselves. By questioning the learners on a regular basis, and in a variety of other ways, an instructor gains valuable information about how well the learners feel they are progressing. Self-assessment activities can follow formal oral proficiency interviews, or occur at regular intervals during the instructional process to evaluate major curricular competencies prior to and following instructional units. They can be conducted daily in the language classroom, or following homework assignments that have required the learners to use the language in the community. Learner/teacher conferences can also be conducted regularly to review individual progress and to compare the teacher's evaluation and the learner's self-assessment. All of these assessment procedures can help the instructor to evaluate the effectiveness of language instruction and can be included in a language learning portfolio, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter FOUR

Language Learning Portfolios

Many of the suggestions given to this point can become part of a Peace Corps trainee's language learning portfolio. Just as artists or architects prepare a portfolio to show the development of their work or to highlight their abilities, language learners can assemble a portfolio to document their progress in language learning. A Peace Corps trainee's language learning portfolio could be placed on file at the Peace Corps country office during the two-year Volunteer service and then returned to the Volunteer at the Close of Service.

A portfolio can consist of a variety of items. Oral proficiency interview results, self-assessment ratings and informal instructor assessments can all become part of the portfolio. The following are suggestions on how Peace Corps language instructors can prepare language learning portfolios.

Oral proficiency development

Language instructors could conduct short tape-recorded oral interviews with language learners during weeks one, four, eight and eleven. These four interviews can then be reviewed at the end of Pre-Service Training to show development and improvement in oral language skills. Following the steps outlined in Chapter 2 on establishing a rating scale, a language instructor could rate improvement in the areas identified on the rating scale. This information could then be used as documentation in determining which trainees are officially sworn in as Peace Corps Volunteers.

Contact assignments

A second suggestion for inclusion in a Peace Corps language learning portfolio involves having the trainees participate in contact assignments in the language community. For example, trainees might conduct a brief interview or carry out specific transactions with native speakers to demonstrate mastery of competencies in the curriculum. These assignments may

be tape recorded and included in the portfolio. During weeks six through twelve, the trainees could be encouraged to collect three to four brief samples of oral language which they believe best represent their ability to use the language with native speakers. The interviews can then be evaluated and used, along with other pieces of information, in determining the final language skill rating for the trainee. The criteria used in evaluating the taped samples will depend on the nature of the competency. Many survival competencies, such as bargaining for food in the market, do not require accurate grammar or perfect pronunciation. Attention to proper language forms is a more important factor in a comptency like expressing gratitude to the host at a formal dinner or ceremony.

Inventory of competencies

For each trainee, the language instructor could keep a checklist of key competencies that are to be covered during Pre-Service Training. These are the competencies designated as important by each country. Sometimes learners may not reach mastery of a particular competency when it is the focus of language instruction but will reach mastery after a period of using the language for other tasks. For example, an instructor could regularly review the list of competencies, and for each trainee check off those that appear to be mastered. The checklist could consist of a three point scale:

1. The trainee has not attempted the competency
2. The trainee has attempted the competency, but still has problems completing it
3. The trainee has mastered the competency

The instructor can gather the information necessary to complete this checklist during regular class sessions.

Self-assessment ratings

The self-assessment ratings (discussed in the previous chapter) should all be included in the Language Learning Portfolio. Of course, it would be valuable for the instructors to review these ratings with the trainees before including them in the portfolio. This could be done at one of the regular learner/teacher conferences, described in Chapter 3. When the trainee has completed the final self-assessment checklist, the instructor could prepare a one-page summary of all the self-assessment ratings to provide a convenient overview of the language learner's perceived abilities in the language.

Oral Proficiency Interview test results

All Oral Proficiency Interview test results for a trainee should be included in the language learning portfolio, but this rating should not be the only indication of the learner's achievement. When this "objective" rating is combined with the additional information described in this chapter, the instructional staff can get a more accurate picture of a language learner's abilities to function in a new language.

The portfolio system outlined above provides the instructor with a variety of sources to use in the evaluation of a language learner's abilities. This approach is fair for the language learner because evaluation does not rest on a single test result, but on a composite of several evaluations. It is important for the staff to agree on the relative importance of these assessments.

The instructor should be careful in looking at each of the pieces of information. In particular, the instructor

will want to check that the pattern of language performance indicated on the various sources of evaluation is consistent. If the results of one evaluation do not seem to agree with other pieces of information, then the instructor needs to consider what may be happening. For example, if an ACTFL oral proficiency rating seems to be lower than the information gathered by the instructor during in-class performance and lower than the learner's self-evaluations, then an explanation would be in order. Perhaps in this particular case, the language learner is nervous in the one-on-one situation during the structured interview. If this information were available, then a sympathetic interpretation of the low ACTFL rating would make sense. The instructor having this information available would then have additional evaluations to use to determine a final rating for this particular language learner.

Summary

This chapter has suggested the use of a language learning portfolio for Peace Corps language programs. The portfolio could consist of oral proficiency development information over the course of Pre-Service Training: tape recordings of contact assignments and short oral interviews, inventories of competencies, self-assessment ratings and formal oral proficiency test results. These five sources of information can provide a more complete picture of a trainee's ability to function in a new language. Peace Corps language instructors should be encouraged to make use of as many of these sources as possible in evaluating the language learning process.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

Communicative Competence Rating Scales

Grammatical Competence

3 0-2 minor errors in structure or vocabulary
2 2+ major errors and/or some minor ones
1 many major and minor errors

Content Competence

3 the message reflects the situation clearly and contains the proper amount of information
2 some interpretation is called for to understand the message and/or there is either too much or too little information
1 the message is not clear due to errors and/or because far too much or too little information is provided

Social Competence

3 there is a successful performance of the competency with socially appropriate strategies and forms
2 the attempt to perform the competency includes some use of socially inappropriate strategies and forms
1 there is no evident attempt to use socially appropriate strategies or forms

Strategic Competence

3 the respondent effectively compensates for any deficiencies in language proficiency through the use of communicative strategies
2 the respondent makes occasional use of communicative strategies
1 there is little or no sign that the respondent makes use of strategies to help in planning or performing a competency

(based on Cohen and Olshtain)

Appendix C

The Language Learner's Proficiency Scale*

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION	SELF-RATING CHECKLIST
Novice -- Low	**Novice -- Low**
Able to respond to or speak a few isolated words -- those borrowed from English, or commonly used, e.g., gracias, ciao, etc.	I can say "hello" and "good-bye."
	I can count to ten
	I can use courtesy words such as "thank you" and "excuse me."
Has identified him/herself as a language learner	I know a handful of words
	I am eager to begin learning my target language
	I have set some goals for my language learning
Novice -- Mid	**Novice -- Mid**
Can express very simple needs in polite language. Uses mostly memorized words and phrases. Can say short phrases if given time to think about what she/he wants to say.	I can respond to simple commands such as "stand up" and "come here."
	I can greet people and take my leave correctly.
Speaks in a heavy accent with many errors and confuses sounds that are similar.	I can ask basic questions, using who, what, when and where.
Speech is difficult to understand, even to teachers used to working with language students.	I can make simple statements and commands such as "it's hot" and "turn on the light."
	I can thank people and make simple requests.
	I can use at least fifty words in appropriate context.
	I can sing one verse of a folk song or popular sing-along tune.
	I can perform at least one task at the novice-high level.

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NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Novice – High

Can ask questions and make simple statements based on memorized sentences. Understands conversation fragments and simple commands. Can deal with simple topics of daily need. Speaks mostly in short, direct sentences, but can say some longer phrases and sentences if given time to think about them first.

Still makes frequent errors in pronunciation and word use. Frequently asks speaker to slow down or repeat. Communicates with co-workers but has difficulty with others.

Behaves considerately in dealing with host country nationals. Understands some nonverbal cues.

Intermediate -- Low

Can speak on familiar topics, ask and answer simple questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and carry on face-to-face discussions. Can pick out the main idea in a friendly informal conversation.

Often speaks incorrectly but by repeating, generally can be understood by native speakers who regularly deal with foreign speakers.

Frequently can understand native speaker if he/she repeats or speaks more slowly.

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST

Novice -- High

I understand and can make simple statements about family, age, address, weather, time and daily activities.

I understand some words when the context helps explain them, e.g., in a cafe or the marketplace.

My vocabulary includes names of basic concepts: days, months, numbers 1-100, articles of clothing, body parts, family relationships.

I can use at least 100 nouns and verbs in appropriate contexts.

I am beginning to know what's expected of me in simple social situations.

I can perform at least two tasks at the intermediate -- low level.

Intermediate -- Low

I can initiate and close conversations appropriately.

I can introduce myself or someone else.

I can buy a ticket, catch a bus or train and get off at the right place.

I can respond to simple directions from customs officials, policemen or other officials.

I can discuss simple topics with friends.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Intermediate -- Mid

Can participate in simple conversations about some survival needs and social traditions. Can discuss topics beyond basic survival, such as personal history and leisure time activities.

Beginning to use correct basic grammar constructions such as subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement.

Intermediate -- High

Can participate in short conversations about most survival needs, limited social conversations and other topics. Gets the gist of conversations on familiar topics, though finds it hard to tune in on long conversations or in unfamiliar situations.

Speaks mostly in short, discrete sentences, but shows occasional bursts of spontaneity. Can use most question forms, basic tenses, pronouns and verb inflections, though still speaks with many errors.

Can be understood by native speakers used to speaking with foreigners. By repeating things, can frequently be understood by the general public.

In dealing with host country citizens, can get along in familiar survival situations and with native speakers accustomed to foreigners.

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST

Intermediate -- Mid

I can handle questions about my marital status, nationality, occupation, age and place of birth.

I can order a simple meal from a restaurant menu.

I can ask for or tell the time, date and day of the week.

I can handle simple business at the post office, a bank and the drugstore.

I'm beginning to speak more correctly; my subjects and verbs generally agree.

I can perform at least one task at the intermediate -- high level.

Intermediate -- High

I can buy my foodstuffs, rent a hotel room and bargain when appropriate.

I can talk about my favorite pastimes or sports.

I can describe how to get from here to places like the post office, a restaurant or a local tourist attraction.

I can talk about things that happened in the past or might happen in the future.

I can carry on simple conversations with native speakers who are used to dealing with foreigners.

I can perform at least two of the tasks at the advanced level.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Advanced

Can participate in most casual and some work conversations. Can give simple directions or explanations at work. Can talk about past and future events. With a minimum of repetition and rewording, can get the gist of normal conversation by native speakers.

Vocabulary is good enough to speak simply with only a few circumlocutions and can speak extemporaneously on many topics.
Accent clearly that of a learner, but can generally be understood.

Advanced plus

Can handle most work requirements and conversations on topics of particular interest. Can express facts, give instructions, describe, report and talk about current, past and future activities.

Often speaks fluently and easily, though occasionally pauses to think of a word. Continues to make some grammatical errors.

In dealing with native speakers, understand common rules of etiquette, taboos and sensitivities, and handles routine social situations when dealing with people accustomed to foreigners.

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST

Advanced

I can describe my work in some detail and discuss with my coworkers most work related tasks.

I can talk comfortably about topics of general interest, such as the weather and current events.

I can deal with and explain unexpected problems, such as losing my traveler's checks.

I can take and give messages by telephone.

I can be understood by most native speakers, and I can follow normal conversations involving native speakers.

I can perform at least one task at the advanced plus level.

Advanced plus

I can hire an employee, discuss qualifications, duties, hours and pay in my new language.

I can instruct a co-worker on how to perform a common task.

I can give opinions and facts and explain points of view.

I can talk with ease about my past, my current activities and what I hope to do in the future.

I generally speak easily and fluently with only minor pauses.

I can make culturally acceptable requests, accept or refuse invitations, apologize and offer and receive gifts.

I can perform at least two of the tasks at the superior level.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Superior

Can converse on most practical, social and professional topics. Can deal with unfamiliar topics, provide explanations, resolve problems, describe in detail, offer support opinions and hypothesize. Beginning to talk about abstract ideas.

Rarely has to grope for a word. Control of grammar is good and errors almost never bother the native speaker.

Can participate in most social and work situations. Understands most nonverbal responses; beginning to understand culture-related humor.

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST

Superior

I can carry out most work assignments in the target language.

I can handle routine social situations with ease.

I can participate effectively in most general discussions involving native speakers.

I can handle normal telephone conversations.

I can listen to a radio program, oral report or speech and take accurate notes.

I can deal with an unexpected problem or a social blunder.

I can support my opinions in a discussion or argument.

I am beginning to understand jokes and word play.

I seldom have to ask speakers to repeat or explain.

I can speak at a normal rate of speed without groping for words or trying to avoid complex grammatical structures.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Distinguished

Can use the language fluently and accurately on all levels of professional need. Can tailor language to fit the audience: counsel, persuade, negotiate, represent a point of view and interpret for dignitaries.

Speaks with only rare pronunciation or grammar errors.

Picks up on most nonverbal cues, understands humor and most allusions. Behaves in a culturally appropriate manner in a range of social and professional settings.

Native Competence

Functions as would an educated native speaker.

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST

Distinguished

I can carry out any job in my second language.

I can speak appropriately to a professional group, my staff, a government official, a friend, the elderly and children.

I can act as an interpreter at a professional meeting or function.

I rarely make pronunciation or grammar errors.

I always understand native speakers, even when they are talking to each other.

I can participate in joking, including puns and word play.

I can read cultural gestures, body language and facial expressions accurately.

Native Competence

I am equally as fluent in my second language as in English.

I have command of idioms, colloquialisms and historical and literary allusions.

I am well-versed in the history, beliefs, customs, politics and geography of the host country.

I am completely at ease culturally in any social or professional setting.

Appendix D

Self-Assessment Competency Checklist (Competencies from Peace Corps Thailand)

APPENDIX D

For each of the following instructional competencies, provide a self-rating using this scale:

1. I cannot perform the following competency
2. I can perform the following competency with difficulty
3. I can perform the following competency with ease

1. FOOD

____ 1.1 Identify common and simple dishes, beverages and fruits visually and verbally.

____ 1.2 Order a meal at a restaurant / market

____ 1.3 Pay the bill and call waiter's attention.

____ 1.4 Identify common and simple food items visually and verbally.

____ 1.5 Inquire about food tastes, cooking styles and ingredients.

____ 1.6 Express likes, dislikes, preferences verbally.

____ 1.7 Bargain for and purchase food items in the grocery store or market.

____ 1.8 Ask for additional eating utensils or seasonings.

Appendix E

Instructional Unit Self-Assessment Checklist (Competencies from Peace Corps Nepal)

For each of the following instructional competencies, provide a self-rating using this scale:

1. I cannot perform the following competency
2. I can perform the following competency with difficulty
3. I can perform the following competency with ease

1. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

____ 1.1 Greet and respond to greetings and introduce oneself and others.

____ 1.2 Ask and respond to questions on personal background, age, occupation, marital status, family relationships and nationality.

____ 1.3 Refuse and request politely to do something for someone.

____ 1.4 Set a time to meet someone and explain reasons for the meeting.

____ 1.5 Invite others, accept invitations, decline invitations with time reference.

____ 1.6 Make small talk on recent experiences, weather and future plans.

____ 1.7 Describe and reply to questions on PCV's salary and length of service.

____ 1.8 Express concerns and ask about concerns of others.

____ 1.9 State general feelings.

____ 2.0 State general feelings of others.